

Report on Visit to Dymer, Ukraine

By Jonathan J. Rikoon

On Wednesday, September 14, I attended the dedication ceremony at the Dymer Jewish Cemetery. I was accompanied by Matt Stafford of the U.S. Embassy in Kiev, as well as a translator and a driver supplied by the Embassy.

Dymer is a village north of Kiev. The Jewish community emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century and by the mid-nineteenth century amounted to several hundred individuals. There is a nearby Jewish agricultural colony started in 1853, known as Rykun.¹ There were almost a thousand Jews in or near Dymer by the end of the nineteenth century and, at the beginning of World War I, they organized an armed self-defense force to protect against pogroms by rampaging Cossacks. By 1926, there were just over two hundred Jews left in Dymer.

Shortly after November 7, 1941, 120 Jews of Dymer were shot in a field between Dymer and Katyuzhanka, on the grounds of the former airport. The rest of the Jewish population was taken to Babi Yar, where they were part of the much larger (and well-known) slaughter there. There is some evidence that, as early as August 1941, 10 Jewish families were shot in Dymer as well. Until now, there has been no memorial to the victims at all.

The mass grave site is probably located in a nearby field. The Lo Tishkach interviewers were unable to pinpoint exactly where it was and, in any event, were unable to obtain any permission from the owner of that property for a memorial. They decided instead to incorporate the memorial into the restored cemetery. The memorial acknowledges the role of the Commission in sponsoring the project and identifies Debevoise & Plimpton LLP as the donor of the necessary funds.

The cemetery itself was in terrible shape before the restoration. Vegetation was “higher than a man’s head,” and most of the pre-war graves and grave stones had disappeared, in many cases simply having been absorbed by the ground and vegetation. There were still some Soviet-era, post-war markers, although not many. Less than half a dozen pre-war graves and grave stones are maintained with individual fences and flowers.

The restoration included removal of most of the overgrown vegetation, leaving pruned trees and grass of modest height. The mass grave memorial tablet itself is adjacent to some of the older intact tombstones. The work is not yet complete, as the decorative tiles around the tablet have not yet been put in place. One of the attendees on this occasion was the artist and artisan who had designed and executed all of the memorial plaques that have been installed during this project, including some that will not be ready for dedication until next month.

There were about a dozen people in attendance at the dedication, including several representatives of the local government administration. Philip Carmel, Executive Director of the Lo Tishkach Foundation, and Lev Shpilsky, Executive Director of VAAD (Association of

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Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine), were present and spoke as well. Those organizations were jointly responsible for the project and the dedication.

There was also a local teacher present who reports that he has made it a point to include the story of the Holocaust and, in particular, the story of the massacre of Dymer's Jews, in his curriculum. Indeed, one of his high school students has written a thesis about that event, and I asked if he could forward it to us.

Also present was an older woman from Rykun, whose father's grave was one of the few well-tended in the Dymer cemetery.

As we looked around the rather large site, we could find only a few remaining grave markers. The site is enclosed by a wall on three sides, but the side adjacent to the road is entirely open (although there is a ditch between the road and the cemetery). It would be a fitting completion to the project to have a fence installed which would provide additional protection for the cemetery and the monument, and will also identify the location as the Jewish cemetery.

I asked Mr. Carmel and Mr. Shpilsky to try to obtain proposals for a fence and to let me know when they had done so. Subsequently we have agreed on a construction proposal and budget which the Commission has approved. Most of the funding for the new fence and gate has been pledged by Debevoise & Plimpton LLP.